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27 June 1958

NRO REVIEW COMPLETED

MEMORANDUM FOR: Special Assistant to the Director
for Planning and Development

SUBJECT : Evaluation of AVIATION WEEK Article on Accelerated
Pied Piper Program

REFERENCE : COR-0059, dated 26 June 1958, Attached

1. Unfortunately, a major problem in assessing the validity of the subject magazine article with regard to Project CORONA is that because of the extremely limited circle of CORONA-cleared personnel it is exceedingly difficult to ask questions outside CIA circles without betraying more interest in the subject than is appropriate.

2. Since the first successful satellite launching last year, there has been world-wide speculation about the use of these devices for reconnaissance purposes. Although WS-117L traces its origins back to 1946 when a Rand study determined the feasibility of placing a satellite in orbit, it did not begin to take shape until Lockheed was selected by ARDC in 1956 as the prime contractor, after design study proposals were submitted the year before by selected contractors. In fact, it could be said that WS-117L can begin tracing its lineage with feasibility studies run under the aegis of Project Feedback (Air Force) and concluded in 1954, with the recommendation that a pioneer visual reconnaissance system be attempted.

3. The original WS-117L concept had called for linking the reconnaissance system to an Atlas ICBM, without any attempt being made to recover a nose cone in the manner of CORONA. Instead, reliance was placed on storage of information on film, magnetic or electrostatic tape, with information retrieval being accomplished thru discharge on command to compatible equipment on the ground. In late 1957, following successes of other missile research programs in achieving nose cone re-entry, it was decided to switch to a recoverable data capsule concept and the Thor booster was substituted for the Atlas, much in the manner described in the article. However, the allusion to parachute recovery of the film, mentioned in the AVIATION WEEK story, appears to be logical speculation rather than inside information.

This document contains information

referring to Project CORONA

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4. A number of the details of the magazine article, with respect to weight of satellite, height of orbit are at some variance with the facts of CORONA. And, as a matter of fact, the magazine points out that the idea of a recoverable data capsule was discarded "a few months ago." Points of fact made in the article include correct identification of the basic booster component, the point of launching, approximate time of first test launching, general method of accomplishing erection of photographic capsule, requirement for circular, north-south orbit, and, coincidentally, the number (20) of vehicles programmed for the CORONA [redacted] schedule (although the magazine states that the figure of 20 will probably be programmed over some five years in contrast to the CORONA accelerated schedule.) No CORONA contractor, other than Lockheed, is named.

5. Of interest in connection with the publicity leaked or released on WS-117L may be the fact that officially the Air Force has had little or nothing to say about Pied Piper. However, within the past year, a French Air Force general officer, reportedly attached to NATO, released to the French press and thus to the world, basic details of the WS-117L program and information that the United States Air Force was working on it. He had allegedly obtained his information from a Lockheed source. Since that time, in magazines other than AVIATION WEEK, in syndicated press releases and in earlier AVIATION WEEK columns there have appeared references to the WS-117L, most having to do with the fact that Lockheed was working on such a system under Air Force sponsorship. No claims of success or failure in concept or design have been made in the name of the Air Force.

6. While the subject article stirs a self-conscious reaction in the breasts of those connected with CORONA, as being completely revealing, objective appraisal seems to indicate that the story is a cleverly-written combination of a few primary facts intermingled with a considerable amount of editorial speculation and obvious deduction. For example, it is no secret that any product of Lockheed Missiles Systems Division comes (1) from Sunnyvale, California, and (2) that it is built under the cognizance of L. E. Root, LAC vice-president and general manager of that division, yet these facts are paraded as part of the "inside truth" tenor of the article. Certainly it would appear that nothing in the article is of a nature so compromising that it should cause changes in the orientation of CORONA. It is merely initial evidence that when the time comes for actual firings, we must be prepared for all sorts of journalistic speculation regarding mission, orbit, targets, results, etc.

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